

COLNAGHI

Est. 1760



The Master of the Female Half-Lengths

(Active in Antwerp during the first half
of the 16th century)

Virgin and Child

oil on oak panel

34.3 x 23.8 cm.;

13 1/2 x 9 3/8 in.

Provenance

Private collection, Madrid.

Literature

M. Díaz Padrón, 'Nuevas pinturas del Maestro de las Medias Figuras', *Archivo Español de Arte*, vol. 53, no. 210, 1980, p. 176 (reproduced in black and white: fig. 10), p. 179.

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The present panel painting of the *Madonna lactans*, a work in an excellent state of preservation, constitutes an important testimony to the specialist nature of some Flemish studios in the first half of the 16th century. With regard to their professional activities, these studios focused on the export of devotional paintings executed with notable skill and technical rigour, based on pre-established models that were extremely successful and in great demand, particularly in the Iberian Peninsula and Italy, and were thus repeated with minor variations.

The Master of the Female Half-Lengths - the name used in the art-historical literature for this anonymous painter known for works such as *The Concert* (fig. 1) in the Harrach Collection (Schloss Rohrau, Austria), in which the figures are depicted half-length - is one of the most appealing Flemish artists of the second half of the 16th century. Attempts to identify this anonymous master, including the proposal by Bemesch that he is the Bruges painter Hans Vereycke or Wickhoff's suggestion that he is the French artist Jean Clouet, have not met with acceptance. At the present time, as the expert Ellen Konowitz has noted, it is considered more accurate to think in terms of a specialist studio or group of artists with a very similar, homogeneous and standardised style, whose surviving output consists of around 100 works.

Most of this artist's *oeuvre* comprises works for private devotion, depicting the Holy Family, the Virgin and Child, single figures of Mary Magdalene (identifiable by her pot of unguent), and half-length images of women reading, writing or playing musical instruments in interiors. Another small group of works consists of relatively small-format altarpieces featuring depictions of religious subjects and landscapes. Some take the form of triptychs, including *The Nativity Altarpiece* in the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Strasbourg, *The Calvary Altarpiece* in the Galleria Sabauda in Turin, *The Altarpiece of the Annunciation, Nativity and Presentation in the Temple* in the Museo del Prado, Madrid, and *The Altarpiece of the Adoration of the Magi* in the Gemäldegalerie der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin.

There is no agreement among experts on the dates of the activity of this artist or on the artistic context in which he worked. It has been suggested that he may have been active in

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cities such as Mechelen, Ghent or Antwerp, at the French court or in Bruges. The figures in some works are comparable to the style of the Bruges school, particularly to the grace and gentleness of the paintings of Adriaen Isenbrandt and Ambrosius Benson. By contrast, in 1968 Robert A. Koch noted parallels between the landscapes by this Flemish artist and those of Joachim Patinir (for example, in works such as *The Flight into Egypt* in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna) and he thus associated his activity with Antwerp. Numerous painters from Bruges and other centres moved to that city, a major commercial and artistic hub with the presence of the Scheldt Estuary making it a centre for trade and export. This artist's dependence on Pieter Coecke van Aelst and Bernard van Orley supports the hypothesis that the Master of the Female Half-Lengths was based in Antwerp.

The Holy Family in an Interior, formerly in the Richard H. Rush Collection in New York, is dated 1536, revealing a degree of maturity already achieved by the artist, as Konowitz has noted. No other work associated with him is dated.

The Marian typology employed in the present panel is that of the *Galaktotrophousa* of Byzantine tradition, known in the West as *Maria lactans* or the *Virgo lactans*. Among the Early Netherlandish painters it was Robert Campin and Rogier van der Weyden who popularised the subject of the breastfeeding Virgin, devising prototypes that were copied and imitated in response to the growing demand for this devotional image.

It should be remembered that Van der Weyden's painting of *Saint Luke drawing the Virgin* in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (c. 1440) depicts the Virgin as the *Madonna lactans*, thus emphasising her motherhood and role as intercessor.

In a study of 1980, Matías Díaz Padrón added this exquisite panel of the *Madonna lactans* to the artist's corpus, emphasising the stylistic traits characteristic of this Flemish master. Like most of his devotional works of Marian iconography, it has a small format, a plain background and the gentle facial features that conform to a single pre-established model in which the affection between the Virgin and the Christ Child is conveyed through gestures and gazes.

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Mary's head is inclined to one side, her oval face in three-quarter profile and her eyes almost closed. She has a straight nose, full lips, a small chin and delicate eyebrows, all features that correspond to this master's canon of grace and beauty. She wears a fur-lined dress, unfastened and belted at the waist, and a mantle. Beneath it is a bodice and a fine gauze chemise, also open to allow her to breastfeed. Her head is partly covered by a turban-like cloth and a delicate veil that reveals her long hair with its symmetrical parting.

The Christ Child, who looks out at the viewer, is naked with just a cloth that barely covers him. His figure type corresponds to the one devised by the Master of the Female Half-Lengths, with curly hair and a thin, slightly elongated body.

The present *Madonna lactans* reveals notable stylistic parallels with the painting of the same subject in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam attributed to this artista (fig. 2), in which the Christ Child's arm also encircles the Virgin's breast.

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Figure 1. The Master of the Female Half-Lengths, *The Concert*, c. 1530.
Harrach Collection, Schloss Rohrau, Austria

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Figure 2. The Master of the Female Half-Lengths, *Virgin and Child*, c. 1520-40.
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

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